

RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 20, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Deep in the Old Testament there is the story of King Saul's failure to respect God's authority. After having only partially obeyed God's explicit commandments, he tried to make up for his self-willed action by promising to offer burnt-offerings and sacrifices to God. At this point the scriptures present one of the finest statements in the entire Bible concerning the importance of obedience: "Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim." (I Sam. 15:22-23).

The principle of obedience runs through all of God's dealings with man. It was a vital principle during the Patriarchal age and the Mosaic age, as it continues to be today during the Christian era. In all of the 1189 chapters of the Bible there is no more fundamental principle than that God expects man to obey his commandments. This is seen in a statement from the prophet Isaiah, "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it." (Is. 1:19-20).

God created the universe for man and then placed him upon the earth as his crowning work of creation. God then gave men guidelines about how to live in order to make his life happy and successful. These rules and commandments are not arbitrary, but are given out of the infinite love of God for man, for the purpose of making man's life meaningful. When man violates these laws he destroys himself. It is seen more readily when man violates the law of gravity, but it is nevertheless true in the moral and spiritual realms that when man violates God's laws, he crushes himself.

In the New Testament Christ said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven," (Matt. 7:21). A similar statement is found in James 1:22, where the writer says, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves." In the entire Bible there is no more fundamental principle than that of obedience.

But It Is Not Easy

All of us are aware, out of our own experience, that it is not easy to be obedient to authority. It appears that there is an innate desire on the part of all of us to be independent and to have our own way. This seems to be an inborn, natural, universal tendency of man. Even our children do not like to be told when to get up, how to dress, what to eat, what to do, and where to go. Any superimposed authority from outside ourselves is likely to be met with resentment.

I sometimes think of the human race as like a herd of wild horses, running free on the open range of our western mountain country. Occasionally we have seen pictures of wild horses enjoying the freedom of the open range. Then we have seen men ensnare some of these horses and put them in corrals. Imagine if you can a particularly handsome young stallion fenced in for the first time in his life. He stamps the ground; he snorts and whinnies; he rears on his hind legs. He resents the loss of his freedom and is ready to fight anything that comes near him. Then, watch as a skilled trainer over a period of days and weeks struggles to get a bridle in his mouth. Then, later on, a saddle on his back. It does not come easily, but eventually the wild range horse is brought under control and tamed. Now, and this is the point, he is ready to do some work that is worthwhile. Until his wild, restless spirit is tamed and his powerful strength is harnessed he accomplishes nothing. Only when he is brought under control does he do any worthwhile work. The same is true with the proud rebellious spirit of man.

The process of growing up and becoming mature is very simple. First of all, in a child's life there must be the necessary external restraints. A child does not know what is good for him and therefore parents must superimpose their seasoned judgment upon his behavior. He must be made to go to bed at a certain time, must be caused to eat the necessary foods, and in many other ways directed in his behavior. Ultimately, however, there comes the time when he is mature enough to transfer these external restraints into internal restraints. Then, he does, on his own, because he realizes their intrinsic value, the things that he had formerly been made to do. Then, and only then, has he reached maturity. Only when we have brought our own wild independent desires under control are we really mature. Of course, this never happens totally, for it is the struggle of a lifetime.

The Trend of Our Day

The trend of our day is toward rebellion. Examples are easy to cite. There is an increase in juvenile delinquency, in hoodlumism, and in racial disturbances. We see actual photographs of pillaging, burning and looting. We read the statistics on an ever-increasing crime rate. Assassination is a prominent threat to our leaders. There are student riots on some of the major university campuses of the land. Revolutions rock one nation after another around the world. Altogether, there is a general spirit of rebellion and lawlessness. It is like a disease--an epidemic--spreading across the world. This spark of rebellion is fanned into a flame by the instant spread of news by means of radio and television. A revolt in Los Angeles sparks one in Chicago. Students on one campus cause riots to flare on other campuses across the land.

We also see the spirit of rebellion in the homes of America. Rebellious children defy their parents and often do as they please. The parental regard of other generations has waned greatly in our generation. Not long ago a college student of mine handed me a newspaper clipping in which Ann Landers reported receiving this letter: "Dear Ann: In a recent column you told a parent that his sassy teenager really WANTED to be hauled up short and disciplined. You said kids often push as far as they can--testing, hoping somebody will say 'Enough. No more of this.' Well, I'm a teen-ager who will back you up. You never wrote truer words. I am a boy almost 19 and I understand things a lot better than I used to. I know from experience that there were times when I talked terrible to my folks and did things I shouldn't have done because I wanted them to move in on me. Instead, they let me do anything. When I got into trouble they made excuses for me and got me off. A high school teacher saved me from becoming a delinquent and a bum. She told me I had too good a brain and too much ability to waste it on nonsense and that I'd better discipline myself because it was apparent that nobody at home was going to do it. That teacher changed my life. She did the job my folks failed to do. I will never forget her. (Signed) George."

We see the spirit of rebellion in our schools. Recently I visited briefly with a professor on the campus of one of our large western universities, a school with more than 27,000 students. He told me that he had recently had in one of his classes one of the much publicized bearded, unwashed beatniks. Several speeches were assigned to the students in this particular class and for each one an outline was to be turned in to the teacher. The rebel made his speeches, but turned in no outlines. When the teacher inquired as to the reason, the eccentric student explained that he felt that this request for an outline was a "violation of his civil rights." He said, "No one is going to tell me how to order my thinking." Such an attitude seems a bit strange, when we stop to analyze the situation. Here was a student "enjoying" an education provided by the state on an expensive campus and under the guidance of a highly trained teacher. While he himself was investing many hours in the educative process he was at the same time rebelling against the school's authority and trying not to receive the benefits which were available to him. Strange behavior indeed, but it grows out of the false spirit of independence and freedom of our day.

We also see the spirit of rebellion as we read of the bitter clashes between labor and management. We see it in connection with government as we witness marching mobs in the streets. We are shocked when one of the leaders says, "If it is a good law I will obey it; if it is a bad law I will disobey it." He sets himself on the judgment seat to determine what is good and bad and takes vigorous action as he thinks best. We also see the spirit of rebellion in the realm of religion, for modern man has exercised his freedom to change religion to suit himself. Nothing seems sacred anymore. Modern man feels that what he wants he must have.

Two Important Reasons

There are two important reasons why we must respect authority. The first is simply that respect for authority is commanded by God. For example, for the home the scriptures teach, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor thy father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." (Eph. 6:1-3). In the world of business, or any situation involving employment, the scriptures teach, "Servants, be obedient unto them that according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not in the way of eye service, as men-pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as unto the Lord, and not unto men." (Eph, 5:5-7).

In regard to obedience to government, the apostle Paul wrote, "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher power: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment." (Rom. 13:1-2). Similarly, we read in Titus 3:1, "Put them in mind to be in subjection to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready unto every good work." In religion, the scriptures plainly teach that we are to be subject to God. Mark 12:28-30 tells us that we must love God with all our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our strength. Acts 5:29 says, "We must obey God rather than men." In all of these key areas we are plainly taught that we must respect authority. However, some are not impressed by the fact that the scriptures teach us to accept authority.

There is a second reason for respecting authority. It is absolutely necessary if civilization is to survive. The alternative is anarchy. In any functioning civilization there is, first of all, legislation. Laws have to be made by the chosen representatives of the people, after

careful study of the needs of the group. Then comes enforcement. Those who defy the laws that have been made by the general population have to be restrained. Finally, in order that individual rights not be ruthlessly disregarded there is a court system. This is the machinery by which a civilization works and any failure in this plan ultimately means the breakdown of civilization.

It must be pointed out that the great mass of people are orderly, law-abiding citizens, and that the only hope of keeping our nation strong and peaceful is for respect for law to be imbedded deeply in the hearts of the people. The hard fact is that it is not possible to police millions of people. The hard fact is that it is not possible to police millions of people into being good. Our hope for survival as a strong free nation lies in our continuing ability to sell the great mass of the population upon the rightness of the basic ethical and moral principles of living. Otherwise, there is no hope for our survival.

Imagine, as an example, the removal of all traffic laws and regulations from our American scene. Now there are no stop signs, no right or wrong side of the road on which one must drive, no rules whatever. It would be utterly impossible to drive a car. It would be suicide. Similarly, when we watch a ball game of any kind, we must be impressed with the fact that the game is made possible only because there are rigid rules and because these rules are respected fully. Remove the rules or ignore the rules, and the game instantly becomes impossible. Similarly, in life itself there are rules which must be respected if life is to go on.

Both People and Principles

Respect for authority includes the requirement that we respect both people and principles. We have been speaking of the need to respect parents, teachers, employers and representatives of government. On the highest level we must respect God. It is also vitally important and consistent with our respecting of certain people that we respect principles. For life to go on in an orderly fashion there must be a general respect for life, for property, and for the rights of others. There must be a general acceptance of the principles of honesty, integrity, and truthfulness. There must be general support for the principles of goodness and purity. There must be acceptance of the value of the principles of kindness and love. We must respect these basic moral and ethical principles if our way of life is to continue and to prosper.

Conclusion

All of this is a great paradox. It would seem at first thought that those who live freely, going their own willful way, would be the happiest of people. Just the opposite is true, however. Happiness lies in living a life of respect for authority. Contrast two young men for a moment. One is the brilliant athlete, an All-American, who performs on the gridiron. For months and years prior to the big game he has given up freedom and toiled incessantly under the most stringent of rules and directions. He has given up leisure time, eaten certain specified foods, and trained every muscle of his body to do a task. The disciplined athlete is a marvelous example of what respect for authority can do. He becomes an All-American and is nationally acclaimed. Visualize a second young man sitting far up in the stands on a Saturday afternoon. He is loud-mouthed, vulgar in word and in thought, and even half-drunk at the time. He is a libertine with no respect for anybody or anything. Which is the happier young man? Which is the more worthwhile young man? Obviously, it is the young man who has accepted discipline in his life.

We must constantly remember that we do not break the laws of God; we only break ourselves when we violate those laws. If our lives are to be successful we must accept properly constituted authority, whether we agree with it or not. How can a child possibly understand parental restrictions, when he has lived only so briefly and so limitedly? The acceptance of this great principle of self-discipline is one of the most difficult things that man must achieve in life, and at the same time it is one of the most rewarding of all principles. Success comes to the man who respects authority.